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## **Retrospective Pilot Study of USAID-funded Education Projects in Malawi**



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**December 2004**

**U.S. Agency for International Development  
Cooperative Agreement No. GDG-A-00-03-00006-00**

**EQUIP1  
CROSS-NATIONAL SYNTHESIS  
OF EDUCATION QUALITY**

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## Foreword

To a large extent, the Malawi education system has remained elitist in its design and its operating structure, serving the needs of a few rather than the majority of the country's youths. At community level and for a long time, one challenge was the widely held attitude which placed a low value on the education of the girl child. The 1994 declaration by the newly elected United Democratic Front government of free primary education (FPE) permitted open access for all children. This was a political decision. However, popular this policy was, it totally overwhelmed the education system which was already reeling from severe infrastructural deficiencies: inadequate classrooms; inadequate qualified teachers; inadequate financial resources to cover shortfalls created through the abolition of school fees; and then the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

This Retrospective Pilot Study provides information on thirteen years of USAID funded projects in Malawi (1991 – 2004) in response to the crisis Malawi has been facing in relation to access and quality in basic education. The Study examines relationships and dynamics between design, outcomes and impact, and four major projects are discussed: Girls Attainment in Basic Education and Literacy (GABLE), Improving Education Quality (IEQ), Quality Education through Support to Teaching (QUEST), and the Malawi Education Support Activity (MESA).

Despite limitations highlighted, the study is an excellent analysis of USAID assistance to the education sector in Malawi and presents a clear and informative picture of efforts that have continued to help policy makers and curriculum designers in the country. The legitimate question posed is on the sustainability of activities in districts where USAID projects have been active, but subsequently moved away to other geographical areas.

The study comes at a prime time when USAID's efforts continue to ensure the establishment of school environments where children are learning and continue engaging the government in dialogue on how best to move forward.

William Mvalo  
Education Team Leader

## Introduction to the Malawi Retrospective Study

The retrospective pilot study was designed to provide information on thirteen years of USAID-funded education projects in Malawi. This study provides a preliminary understanding of (i) the conceptualization of education quality that was explicit or implicit in project designs over time; (ii) the interventions carried out to enhance education quality; and (iii) the impact of interventions. The results of this study are being used to inform the larger three-year EQUIP1 study, the Cross-national Synthesis of Education Quality.

The four consecutive education projects in Malawi funded by USAID between 1991 and the present were studied.

- Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE I and GABLE II) (1991-1998)
- Improving Educational Quality/Malawi (IEQ/Malawi) (1998-2003)
- Quality Education Through Supporting Teachers (QUEST) (1998-2003)
- Malawi Education Support Activity (MESA) (2003-ongoing)

### *Research questions*

The study was guided by the following general questions which probe the relationship between project interventions and resultant education quality at the primary level:

- How has education quality been conceptualized and measured within a series of projects or an integrated program?
- What educational interventions are identified as having had a positive effect on quality? What interventions have not had an impact on quality?
- Have the interventions had different impacts in different educational environments?
- What are the long-term effects of interventions on the system, teachers, schools, communities, and student outcomes? Are the programs or ideas from the programs being sustained or incorporated into government policies and programs?
- Do the documents available reveal local voices or points of view concerning the impact of programs?

### *Analytical framework*

To seek answers to the questions above, the following nine-point analytical framework was used to organize information about the four projects:

- Vision of quality within the project design;
- Interventions intended to improve educational quality;
- Indicators of quality built into the project design;
- Intended outcomes (student and other outcomes) associated with quality and the measurement of these outcomes;
- Locations and socio-economic contexts of program implementation;

- Degree of integration of program interventions with government programs;
- Impact and sustainability of program interventions over time;
- Program areas of success, as identified by evaluators and stakeholders, in achieving improved quality of education; and
- Challenges, as identified by evaluators and stakeholders, in achieving improved quality of education.

### ***Methodology and limitations***

This study was based on document analysis; limitations of funds and time prevented the collection of information in the field. The researchers studied project documents such as evaluation studies, program implementation reports, and donor and contractor information documents to obtain an understanding of the nine factors listed above. As various partners were involved in the implementation of the four USAID education projects in Malawi, researchers had considerable difficulty locating original proposals and design documents. This is especially true for those projects that were implemented five or more years ago. In addition, no financial information could be obtained that would allow for a better understanding of the link between specific financial input and the intended quality of educational outcome. This study, therefore, has limitations since it was based on information unevenly available from earlier studies, project evaluations, and project documents.

### ***Structure of the paper***

Contextual information is given in the next section of the paper, covering educational issues and policies in Malawi between 1990 and the present time, the period of time covered by the projects in this study. The four projects are then described in detail using the nine points above as an analytical framework. In the final section, we summarize what the information available indicates about the relationship between project interventions and education quality in Malawi.

## **Malawi Education Sector: The Rapidly Changing Context**

The USAID-funded projects described in this paper were implemented in a period of extraordinary growth in access to education in Malawi. The growth was so rapid, particularly after 1994 when fees for primary education were eliminated, that it greatly exacerbated already existing problems in the system such as insufficient numbers of schools and classrooms, large class sizes, under-prepared teachers, inadequate quality and quantity of learning materials, and a teacher-centered teaching/learning process based on rote memory. The following outlines this period of rapid growth and reviews some of the reasons for and consequences of this growth.

A key event in Malawi's history occurred in 1994 when the country became a multi-party state. Within a very short period thereafter, the government adopted a strategy to provide free primary education (FPE), shift to a free market economy, adopt a bill of rights, implement a poverty alleviation program (PAP), and create a national parliament with three main parties. Within a few years, the Government of Malawi (GOM) issued two important national policy documents –

*Vision 2020* in 1998 and the *Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)* in 2002. These documents portray education as a key factor in reducing poverty and encouraging development.

To ensure that the education system contributes to successful implementation of these national policies, two additional education documents were prepared – the *Education Sector: Policy Investment Framework (PIF)* in 2000 and the *Education for All Action Plan (EFA)* in 2002. Both documents address the key challenges facing Malawi's education system. The PIF is being used by donors as the blueprint for future education investment. The EFA addresses gaps identified in the PRSP and the PIF as well as the educational improvements that need to be made by 2015. The Malawi Ministry of Education is presently working with donors to prepare a national action plan for education to implement the policies in these four closely linked documents.

Although policies are in place and the shift to decentralization is underway, the education system is experiencing a serious crisis. Many of the problems experienced by the education sector have been identified by the above documents and in the World Bank's 2004 discussion paper tentatively titled *Cost, Financing, and School Effectiveness of Education in Malawi*.

### ***Contextual variables affecting quality: Economic issues and education expenditures***

Macroeconomic and demographic conditions play a major role in all countries in determining the development of education. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita gross national product of around \$170 in 2000. The average life expectancy at birth is about 43 years. Agriculture is the backbone of the economy and employs 85 percent of the economically active population. Agriculture accounts for 38 percent of GDP which varies widely from year to year depending on crop conditions and world prices for its major exports, tobacco and tea.

During the period of the projects reviewed in this paper, recurrent expenditure on education overall has increased, although per pupil annual expenditure has decreased because of the extremely rapid growth of student enrollments, particularly after 1994. Despite increase in recurrent expenditure, the total expenditure on education has remained the same because of a drop in development expenditure from 1.9 percent (1993 to 1996) of GDP to 0.6 percent (1998 to 2001).

The World Bank reports in the 2004 discussion paper that recurrent expenditures per pupil alternately increased and decreased between 1993 and 2001. Development expenditures decreased from the same baseline year to 2000, showing the first increase in 2000/01. The same paper shows per pupil annual recurrent expenditure in 1993/94 kwacha as follows:

**Per Pupil Annual Recurrent Expenditure**

	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01
Primary	94	58	83	82	108	93	95	61
Secondary	589	356	322	252	266	181	276	n.a.

Source: Government of Malawi, 2001.

Malawi's overall expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP is substantially below other countries such as Uganda and Kenya. The World Bank Development Indicators CD ROM shows public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP as follows: 1990-3.17 percent; 1991-3.13 percent; 1992-4.72 percent; 1993-4.34 percent; 1994-4.13 percent; 1995-5.33 percent; 1996-n.a; 1997-n.a; 1998-4.59 percent; 1999-4.06 percent. Almost 33 percent of total development expenditure in education has been provided by donors.

Despite the FPE policy of 1994, households still pay a large portion of costs for their children's education. In the District Household Survey of 2002, many parents report that they cover the cost of school supplies, uniforms, textbooks and contributions to school development funds. This represents as much as 80 percent of pupil public expenditures.

### ***Access issues***

Primary school enrollment in the country almost doubled from 1.8 million to 3.2 million between 1994 and 1997 after the government introduced free primary education. A baseline study carried out under the JICA-funded NIPDEP project in June 2003 revealed that the ratio of students per classrooms at the primary level ranged from 121 to 241 in the six project districts. These data indicate a classroom shortfall between 50 percent and 200 percent at the primary level. In addition, safe water and latrines are limited, which are particularly serious problems in primary schools, with less than half the schools having safe water and the ratio of latrines available to boys and girls much too high.

### ***Equity issues***

Enrollment of boys and girls in primary education is increasingly equitable, although before 1996 almost twice as many boys as girls attended and completed primary school. The present generally equitable nature of the system is attributed primarily to the creation of a gender-sensitive curriculum developed by the Gender Appropriate Curriculum (GAC) Unit and the activities of the Social Mobilization Campaign (SMC) both conducted under USAID's GABLE Project from 1991 to 1998.

Despite advances, the enrollment of girls decreases as they advance through the system. In 2001, 48 percent of the relevant age group was in primary, 40 percent in secondary, 35 percent for primary teacher preparation, and 26 percent at university level. Although the survival rate for boys and girls in primary education is now relatively even, a discrepancy exists between rural and urban areas. There is a consistent urban/rural gap between 20 percent and 30 percent from grades one through eight. This can be explained by better teacher student ratios in urban areas, a higher rate of poverty in rural areas, and disproportionately high repetition rates eventually resulting in drop outs particularly in rural areas. Urban youth are three times more likely to enroll at the secondary level than youth from rural areas.

### ***Internal efficiency issues***

Given high repetition rates in primary as well as high dropout rates, 60 percent of public resources are used on dropouts or repeating students. It takes 20 school years to generate a single graduate from primary. The government is paying for an extra 12 years to graduate a student from grade 8. This represents a critical efficiency problem. There is also a critical inefficiency in teacher deployment. There is, in fact, a wide variability in the number of teachers per schools with similar enrollments. The range of teachers assigned to primary schools with 1,000 students ranges from five to 40. In schools with 40 teachers, enrollments range from 500 to 3,800. In addition, there are strong differences between teacher pupil ratios and qualified teacher pupil ratios, especially between urban and rural areas.

### ***Quality issues***

The situation described above has led to critical challenges concerning educational quality that have arisen primarily as a result of a rapidly increasing number of pupils within an extremely resource-poor environment. Quality is a result of a complex mix of factors that includes inputs that relate to improving learning such as textbooks, instructional materials, teacher qualifications, and professional development opportunities, as well as the processes that take place in the school and the classroom such as teaching-learning approaches, school climate and leadership, school-based teacher development programs, and community involvement in planning and program implementation.

With the exception of textbooks for primary education, educational resources in Malawi are lacking and processes are difficult to upgrade. The CIDA primary school textbook program has provided one textbook per child for all subjects in primary education. Other resources for primary education such as desks, and pedagogical materials such as maps and chalk, are in short supply. It is estimated, for example, that there are 38 students for each desk at the primary level, suggesting that a great majority of children sit on the floor.

The baseline study conducted by the JICA/NIPDEP project in June of 2003 showed that the ratio of unqualified teachers to total teachers in six districts ranged from 23 percent to 38 percent at the primary level. It was reported in a 2002 final project report that, at the primary level, the pupil teacher ratio was 72 to one while the pupil to qualified teacher ratio was 143 to one. Students per permanent classrooms ranged from 106 to 241 at the primary level. It is estimated that only four percent of all primary schools have electricity. Lack of teacher housing in rural areas causes teachers to refuse assignment, while the HIV/AIDS pandemic contributes to teacher shortages due to increased illness and turnover rates. About 6,000 teachers are thought to have died from AIDS-related illnesses between 2000 and 2001 alone.

Key processes at the classroom level are crucial for learning. With high ratios of unqualified teachers, the education system relies on inservice to improve classroom-level planning, instruction, student evaluation and classroom management, which is seen as costly. Few teachers have access to upgrading programs through which they can earn diplomas. Most donors have provided funding for institutional capacity building of the six colleges of teacher education and



to create a cadre of trainers outside of these colleges to conduct inservice programs. Of particular interest is the focus of GTZ on improvement of primary preservice and inservice professional development. These efforts at improving teacher quality, however, fall far short of what is needed to improve teachers' skills and attitudes in key quality-related areas such as subject-matter knowledge, student-centered teaching skills, and overall professional identity and morale.

Time on task is a key contributor to education quality. In some areas such as Mangochi, students are absent for up to three months and as many as 50 percent or more may be absent on a given day. The main causes of the high student absence rates include unattractive and overcrowded classrooms, cultural practices and ceremonies, distance between home and school, caring for sick relatives, engagement in family work or income generation, and a school calendar that does not take into account the agricultural calendar that governs the lives of many rural families.

The perceived importance of primary education by parents is still high, however, as reported the 2002 household survey on education. Also, community involvement is growing in school activities including donations such as bricks for building new schools and donations of time through volunteerism. Public awareness campaigns sponsored by various donors including USAID have impacted positively on community participation in districts where these projects have been based.

Academic performance is generally used as a measure of learning. In a study of fourth grade students' scores across nine Sub-Saharan African countries, Malawi fared below the average in literacy (35 percent compared to 53.4 percent average), numeracy (43 percent compared to 47.2 percent average), and total average score (51.7 percent compared to 53.8 percent), with the life skill score above average.<sup>1</sup> For the baseline JICA study, the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) developed achievement tests for standards 4 and 6 and forms 1 and 3. Only one school in a sample of 24 primary schools demonstrated mathematics and English comprehension scores over 50 percent (in standard 4 only).

As the above discussion argues, most quality concerns emerge from institutional factors such as large numbers of students, small numbers of classrooms, inadequate learning environments, and unqualified or under-qualified teachers. In all of these areas, rapidly expanding enrollments have swamped the system's ability and resources to support the improvement, or even the maintenance, of quality, although without the rapid increase of donor support since the introduction of FPE quality would have declined even more sharply.

It is within this context that the four USAID-funded projects (GABLE, IEQ, QUEST, MESA) described in the next section of the paper were implemented. The following section begins by looking at Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) which was initiated by USAID in the early 1990s. The paper then follows subsequent USAID projects and, using the nine-point analytical framework, tries to locate threads that run through various program interventions which address the issue of quality.

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<sup>1</sup> Chinapah, Vinayagum, *Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) Project in Africa*, Paper prepared for the ADEA Biennial Meeting, 2003.

## **USAID's Strategic Objectives in Education**

The four projects discussed in this paper were funded by USAID and were implemented in the context of USAID's strategic objectives in education in Malawi. These strategic objectives identified access, quality, and efficiency as important themes.

By the completion of GABLE I (1991-1994), the Government of Malawi had improved its statistics on access and equity. Quality and efficiency, on the other hand, were still poor. GABLE II (1994-1998) was intended to improve quality and efficiency especially through reduction in repetition and drop-out rates.

USAID's strategic objectives included

- Supporting the Ministry of Education in developing the Policy Investment Framework (PIF) as a sector-wide approach to improving access, quality, and efficiency in the education system;
- Supporting efforts that promote gender equality and improve classroom retention rates;
- Improving the Ministry of Education's Planning Unit and its Education Management Information System (EMIS);
- Creation of a policy environment seeking to develop sustainable and effective schools and classroom practices.

Responding to the above objectives of improving the educational system by enhancing quality, efficiency, and innovative classroom practices, USAID implemented IEQ and the QUEST programs during the late 1990s.

As the educational issues related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa have become more pressing during recent years, and with the prevalence of HIV/AIDS increasing rapidly in Malawi, a new strategic focus in the educational sector for USAID is addressing the HIV/AIDS problem through education. Consequently, the newly launched MESA project in Malawi will address and mitigate this critical social concern that directly has an impact on access, persistence, and quality of education.

## **USAID-funded Projects in Education in Malawi (1991-present)**

### **Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE I and II) (1991-1998)**

#### ***Objectives of the projects***

USAID/Malawi Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) project promoted girls' participation in schooling within a broader systemic effort to address quality and efficiency in the Malawi primary education system. GABLE throughout its first and second phases consisted of project support for technical assistance and projectized activities (PA) and non-project general budgetary support (NPA) for government policy reform aimed at creating greater equity, quality, and efficiency in basic education.

GABLE I (1991-1994) resulted from an agreement between USAID and the Government of Malawi for a five-year \$20 million program. The project sought to increase girls' attainment (defined as access, persistence, and completion) in primary education. The program consisted of \$14 million in NPA in support of policy reform and \$6 million in PA for activities and technical assistance over the life of GABLE I. An ultimate goal of the project was reduction of fertility.

GABLE II (1994-1998), designed at the time of the introduction of free primary education, provided an additional \$25.5 million, \$21 million in NPA general budgetary support and \$4.5 million in PA for technical activities. GABLE II was designed to increase the long-term financial base for education through non-project assistance, and improve the quality, availability, effectiveness, and relevance of primary education and the attainment of girls through project activities.

#### ***Vision of quality within the projects' designs***

Under GABLE I, girls' attainment (attendance, persistence, and completion) in primary education was the major goal. The vision of quality in GABLE I was more indirect than direct, with an emphasis on girls' attendance and successful completion of the eight years of primary education. However, since girls' success and attainment in school are heavily dependent on quality of education, quality was part of the supportive environment that GABLE I sought to build, for example, through constructing classrooms in needy districts, increasing the number of textbooks available through competitive delivery, reducing teacher pupil ratios through the introduction of double shifts and multigrade classrooms in some areas, and encouraging increase in GOM spending for primary education. Although by 1994 when free primary education was introduced, quality and efficiency within the system were declining, the 1994 GABLE II PAAD states that quality would have been worse without GABLE I:

Gains in access within the education system have aggravated the quality problems in a system that was already impoverished before GABLE I began.....There is no doubt that quality and efficiency are poorer than

they were four years ago when the analysis for GABLE I was undertaken. This would have deteriorated even further, however, had GABLE I not been launched. (USAID/Malawi 1994, p.9 and p. 11)

Given the decline of quality, identified in the GABLE II design as an increasingly pressing issue, the second phase of GABLE identified education quality improvement more explicitly as a goal. GABLE II's objectives of increasing the long-term financial base for education through NPA, and improving the quality, availability, efficiency, and relevance of primary education for girls through PA, comprise a holistic, multi-pronged approach to quality improvement as adopted in the mid-1990s by projects in many other countries grappling with the effects of rapidly increasing enrollments as a result of Education for All policies and goals.

### *Interventions intended to improve education quality*

One of the major achievements of the three years of GABLE I was the increase in allocations of the GOM budget to the education sector and to primary education achieved through NPA conditionalities. In addition to this, project interventions accomplished the following: (i) implemented measures designed to increase access and persistence of girls in primary education such as school fee waivers for non-repeating girls from standards 2 to 8 and encouragement of timely entry to standard 1; (ii) launched a Social Mobilization Campaign to change attitudes and elicit support of parents and communities to educate girls; (iii) increased the number of schools through the establishment of Community-Based Schools; (iv) revised the primary school curriculum to make it more gender sensitive through the Gender Appropriate Curriculum (GAC) Unit; (v) introduced a competitive procurement system to supply and distribute textbooks to primary schools; (vi) supported a small school construction program; and (vii) introduced a school census program to assist the Ministry in planning (AED 1998, p. 5).

GABLE II NPA supported primarily an increase of the long-term financial base for education. Project activities focused on improving the quality, availability, and efficiency of primary education in the following ways: (i) increased the number of schools in the Community-Based Schools program with a focus on improved attainment for girls; (ii) recruited and trained more teachers; (iii) got more learning materials into the hands of pupils through further competitive distribution of textbooks; (iv) encouraged policy changes to increase school efficiency such as double-shifting in urban schools, reallocating teachers and learning materials to lower standards where repetition is highest, exploring possibilities for age streaming, and restricting late entry into primary school; and (v) improved the statistical and planning capacity of the Ministry of Education through an extension of the school census started under GABLE I.

Project activities also focused on improving the relevance of primary education for girls through the following approaches: (i) strengthened the Gender-Appropriate Curriculum (GAC) Unit; (ii) established a girls' scholarship fund for eligible secondary school girls; and (iii) improved girls' scores on the Primary School Leaving Exams through the foregoing quality-related inputs. In addition, under GABLE II the Village-Based School (VBS) program to increase access and quality and the Social Mobilization Campaign (SMC) to increase community awareness of the value of girls' education were continued and expanded.

The SMC, initiated under GABLE I in 1993 and continued through GABLE II, has been an important project. The SMC has evolved as a multi-faceted campaign that focused on drawing more girls into primary school, with an emphasis on keeping them there until they complete the primary cycle. The SMC initially concentrated on determining what messages and activities might persuade Malawians that a complete primary education benefits both individual girls and their communities. In GABLE I the primary thrust of the program was disseminating positive messages about girls' participation in education, using the primary vehicle of the Theatre for Development program based at Chancellor College with outreach activities at the community level implemented by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and Community Services (MOWCACS).

In GABLE II the SMC broadened to include community participation techniques in the research, generation, and dissemination of messages focused on girls' education. The social idea emphasized in the SMC was that primary education is useful to individual girls as well as to society. The target group reached in the campaign was made up of parents, peers, teachers, initiation counselors, school committee members, and local leaders. Theatre for Development continued but the overall program expanded to include (i) developing functional school committees that would facilitate two-way communication between the school and the community, (ii) mobilizing communities to participate in school development activities, and (iii) community monitoring of teacher and pupil behavior as well as classroom performance.

SMC under GABLE I and II specifically encouraged changed attitudes on the education of girls at the community level. The SMC continued after 1998 as SMC-EQ, implemented by the Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation (CRECCOM), a Malawian NGO that is an offshoot of USAID/SMC projects. With an expanded mandate, SMC-EQ works with communities, schools, and the government on strengthening education quality, including improvement of infrastructure, classroom practices, community participation and ownership, government resource allocations including an increase in the number of and quality of teachers, and better pupil performance as parameters of quality.

### ***Location and socio-economic contexts of implementation***

GABLE I was signed in September 1991. In 1994, while GABLE I was underway, newly elected president Bakili Muluzi announced in his inaugural speech that, as part of his commitment to democracy, primary education would henceforth be free. The announcement was in keeping with an agreement reached in 1990 at the World Education for All Conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, that all countries would strive to achieve universal primary education by the year 2000. From May 1994 through September 1994, primary enrollments swelled from 1.8 million to 3.2 million. Twenty-two thousand primary teachers, 18,000 without qualifications, were hired, nearly doubling the primary teaching force. Over the next few months, most unqualified teachers received a crash two-week orientation to their new profession.

Faced with increased enrollments, the Ministry of Education undertook an aggressive campaign to attract donor funding to assist with teacher education and preparation, classroom construction, textbooks and learning materials, and other support services. As the former Minister of Education said when interviewed for the GABLE evaluation, "We went to the donors and said,

‘We want free primary education. We are on this train. We are going with or without you. Are you with us or not?’” The donor community responded with more than \$130 million for primary education. Exuberant over the advent of democracy, the populace enthusiastically endorsed free primary education as a symbol of equity for Malawi’s underserved population. The new Malawi government gained a great deal of political capital through the extension of free primary education.

When GABLE II was designed during the summer of 1994, the policy of free primary education in all standards announced by President Muluzi had just been established. USAID officials were stretched thin. They were simultaneously designing several major program amendments, of which GABLE II was one. The GABLE II design did not directly address the dramatic increase in primary school enrollments brought about by the policy of free primary education. Rather, USAID’s design emphasized several general policies such as reducing repetition rates in addition to the requirement of the government setting minimum and maximum ages of entry into primary school as conditions to be met for continued support from USAID.

GABLE I and II were nationwide projects. The 82 percent of GABLE funding that was made up of non-project assistance represents a project with nationwide impact. The Social Mobilization Campaign, after the pilot in Machinga, a district chosen because of especially low enrollment of girls in primary education, became a nationwide program using the networks established under the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs and Community Services for outreach activities. Some of the activities under GABLE I and II targeted disadvantaged communities, such as the school building and rehabilitation component and the Village-Based School component.

### ***Degree of integration of program interventions with government programs***

GABLE I and II were aligned with the government’s overall plan to expand primary education and improve quality, with an emphasis on expanding girls’ opportunities to enter and, particularly, succeed in school. There were, however, a few caveats. GABLE I supported the government’s plan to increase educational access but only within the context of improved efficiencies in the system. For this reason, the USAID team actually discouraged the universal waiver of school fees for all standard 1 pupils that began in 1991 and then moved successively up a standard each year until FPE for all eight standards was announced in 1994.

There were, however, two major issues on which USAID was insisting, issues that the government was reluctant to address at that time: repetition policies and admission-age policies. USAID’s conditions attached to the disbursement of NPA funds required that the government issue repetition and admission policy directives. These policies were meant to restrict repetition of classes and put into place appropriate admission age policies. Although the former condition was implemented with rather weak support and success, the latter condition could not be implemented due to high demand for education.

### ***Impact and sustainability of interventions over time***

GABLE I and II both focused on access, equity, and quality with the explicit emphasis of GABLE I on girls’ persistence and success in primary education and the emphasis of GABLE II

on a combination of all of these factors with a more explicit focus on quality. The GABLE project overall had a number of noteworthy achievements, including increased government investment in primary education as a result of NPA conditionalities.

Achievements during the period of GABLE I and II include dramatically increased primary enrollments and persistence of girls. From the first year of GABLE implementation through 1996, girls' enrollments at the primary level almost doubled and girls' enrollments as compared with boys' rose from 45 percent to 47 percent. Of particular importance, in a country where girls often leave school before completing the primary standards, is that girls' enrollment as a proportion of standard 8 enrollments has increased since 1991 from 36 percent to 39 percent by 1996. This spectacular increase was assisted by fee waivers that were offered to non-repeating girls from standard 2 onward. GABLE, of course, did not achieve these increases alone, but by working closely with the Government of Malawi to support its programs to expand access, equity, and quality.

Policies encouraging increased girls' attainment, therefore, were very successful. The question immediately arises of what kind of educational experience girls, or indeed any pupils, had when they entered school at a time when the quality of education was rapidly decreasing as a result of accelerating enrollments after the introduction of free primary education in 1994. This remained a big question for both the Government of Malawi and donors after 1994 since the quality of education kept declining as more and more students entered an education system that did not have the resources to handle them all. Although GABLE was not able to keep declining quality at bay, increasing emphasis in GABLE II on quality factors such as improving teaching, getting more learning materials to pupils, and producing gender-appropriate curriculum were certainly helpful in setting the stage for improving quality in future.

An important component of the GABLE project throughout was to build support in communities for enhancing girls' access and persistence in education. As a result primarily of the Social Mobilization Campaign, girls' education became much more visible on the national agenda. An example of one intervention that had a strong impact was a participatory theater model that was used as a communication tool and a research method. Researchers lived within the community and worked with community members to develop plays that reflected their concerns about girls' education. Growing from a small pilot, GABLE developed into a national social mobilization campaign to encourage girls to enter and remain in school.

The SMC, part of GABLE I and II, was identified as being highly successful. The program has been continued through the SMC-Educational Quality Pilot Project that started in 1998, the year GABLE came to an end, and has continued in two national phases since then, SMC-EQ, funded by USAID and implemented by Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation (CRECCOM) a Malawian NGO that evolved out of GABLE.

The combination of policy initiatives, project activities at the school and classroom level, and social mobilization have been particularly successful and GABLE is often cited as one of USAID's most successful projects.

### ***Areas of success in achieving education quality as identified by evaluators and stakeholders***

A January 1999 evaluation of the GABLE I and II Projects by CDIE, which functions under the auspices of USAID, points out that

Where the Social Mobilization Campaign and Village-Based Schools Programs operated, program implementers took steps to improve schools. For example, communities became involved in schools, female teachers were recruited, interactive learning methodologies were tried, and sanctions were imposed against male teachers who abused girls. (CDIE 1999, pp 15-16)

This shows that in areas where the Social Mobilization Program was implemented, there were some quality improvements. In addition, if increased public financing of education were identified as an indicator of enhanced educational quality by the designers of the project, then GABLE was successful in that the Government did increase its funding for education from 10 percent to 23 percent of national budget between 1990 and 1998.

### ***Challenges in achieving quality education as identified by evaluators and stakeholders***

The CDIE evaluation states that despite the euphoria and enthusiasm for improving education, it appeared that overall the quality of education for girls and boys declined during the GABLE period because of circumstances beyond the project's control. The introduction of free primary education flooded the Malawian school system with students, with serious consequences:

- Eighteen thousand out of the 22,000 new teachers brought on board were not qualified and were given only minimal inservice training.
- Class sizes remained unevenly distributed. Teachers in the early standards tended to have very large classes, some in the hundreds, while teachers in the upper standards often had very small classes, a situation unchanged since pre-GABLE days.
- By 1999, there was a shortage of 38,000 primary classrooms; teachers were holding their classes under trees or in overcrowded buildings.
- Primary education advisers were not prepared to serve the tremendous influx of new and untrained teachers in a training, supervision, and support capacity.
- Systems were not functioning reliably to distribute and deliver primary textbooks and learning materials to schools on time.

Another indicator of good quality education, as perceived in the design of GABLE II, was reduced repetition of students. Under USAID's pressure the government issued a directive in 1995 to all schools stating that, from now on, repetition rates should be reduced and only a specific percentage of repeaters should be allowed per standard. By setting repetition goals for all standards, policy makers hoped to encourage schools and teachers to make better decisions as to which students should repeat. While the policy targeted a major problem in the Malawi education system, there was not strong government support for the policy and teachers were not prepared to implement this policy effectively. Teachers, for example, did not understand that repetition, large class sizes, and resulting lack of materials have a negative impact on their own teaching styles and habits. In fact, repetition had become such an engrained part of the system



that a majority of the teachers believed that if a child does not repeat she/he is not ready to move on to the next level. They often referred to non-repeaters as “beginners.”

In summary, GABLE I and II were implemented in an environment that was marked by the slogan “bring in the girls.” USAID program implementers, as well as the whole system in which they were working, focused so intensively on increasing access and persistence that initially issues of quality were not paramount. However, both the Government of Malawi and donors appeared to learn quickly that with skyrocketing enrollments and plummeting quality, an intensified and more explicit focus on quality would be the most productive focus of policies and program implementation in the last part of the decade.

### **Improving Educational Quality/Malawi (IEQ/Malawi) (1998-2003)**

#### ***Objectives of the project***

Just as quality concerns were emerging in all donor and evaluation reports in Malawi, USAID launched the Improving Education Quality/Malawi (IEQ/Malawi) program in 1998. IEQ I and II were USAID programs that were implemented in many countries between 1991 and 2002. The overall purposes of the IEQ projects were to (i) inform decisions about policy and practice that reflect the reality of the school experience in the environment in which it occurs; (ii) strengthen the professional capacity of host country educators and researchers to obtain and use that knowledge; and (iii) introduce innovations to improve educational quality in learning systems through applied research on classroom-related activities, ultimately for the improvement of the quality of education in the country. IEQ efforts focused on research that reflected the cultural context and the national reform priorities of each country, measurement of teaching and learning, and partnerships with host-country institutions and researchers to conduct the activity. The program in Malawi was launched during the second phase of the project, IEQ II.

Malawi was a promising candidate for the IEQ II Project in 1998, in terms of both need and desire on the part of the government for more thorough knowledge and research on the best practices of previous and ongoing interventions that could be used for decision-making and defining intended outcomes. Increased government budgetary allocations for education and continued donor assistance had eased the burden somewhat but were insufficient to overcome deficiencies in professional development programs, infrastructure, supervision support, community involvement, and capacity to conduct qualitative and multi-method research to inform the long-term agenda for sustained educational quality.

The main objective of the program in Malawi was to build the institutional capacity of educators to identify approaches to overcome growing educational deficiencies in terms of quality. The focus was on building Malawian institutional capacity to design and manage research that illuminated the realities of educational quality at the pupil and classrooms levels. It was also designed to analyze the implications of findings in terms of operational changes needed within classrooms and to contribute to policy reform and dialogue among practitioners and stakeholders.

Subsequently a conceptual model was developed to examine the factors that influence learning by specifically examining the relationships among teacher factors, external influences, and pupil outcomes. The hypothesis of this model was that teacher quality, as well as factors that take place outside the classroom, influences pupil outcomes. Under IEQ/Malawi numerous studies were produced that aimed to inform donors and policy makers of the cultural context of classrooms and measures of teaching and learning.

### ***Vision of quality within the project design***

IEQ/Malawi reflected Malawi's vision of quality for its educational system, i.e., a system characterized by a decentralized approach with a focus on the school and classroom with frequent supervision and training support for teachers and communities to build and enhance skills at all levels so that ultimately more students complete the cycle of schooling. The USAID-funded Quality Education through Supporting Teaching (QUEST) project, implemented soon after the start of IEQ/Malawi, incorporated features to strengthen acquisition of this vision, and the IEQ/Malawi was developed to link with and build upon knowledge gained from QUEST as well as from the USAID-funded Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) project. The resultant IEQ/Malawi research studies, designed to strengthen the in-country capacity to conduct qualitative and multi-method research, were intrinsic to the vision to measure the outcomes of earlier and ongoing interventions and assess whether or not they were contributing to the achievement of the desired vision of quality.

### ***Degree of integration of interventions with government programs***

At the invitation of USAID in Malawi, the IEQ/Malawi project formed a partnership with the Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation USA/Malawi Field Office to examine the implementation of QUEST through four years of the primary school cycle. A long-term research agenda and professional development programs coalesced in this collaboration. Representatives from several university and teacher training institutions and the Centre for Research and Training (CERT) joined the research team.

### ***Research implementation process***

The IEQ/Malawi Project collected baseline data and conducted follow-up surveys in February and October of 1999 respectively. The complete research interval was 1999 – 2002. Sixty-nine schools participated: 64 in Mangochi and five in Balaka (serving as comparison schools), as representative of schools across the country. The schools were selected using a random sampling method after stratifying on school and class size. The subjects involved in the study included head-teachers, classroom teachers, pupils, school committees, and members of the community. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and testing. The key variables for comparison were pupil home language, number of qualified teachers and unqualified teachers in the school, and percent of pupils passing the primary school leaving examination. The data included

- Curriculum-based measures of pupil performance in literacy (Chichewa and English) and numeracy for standards 2 and 4;
- Observations of teachers' pedagogical skills;

- Teachers' knowledge and skills in English and mathematics;
- Availability and use of instructional materials; and
- Interviews with pupils, teachers, head-teachers, and community members.

### ***Outcomes of the research***

Descriptive analysis of baseline data resulted in findings that were shared throughout the country so developers, programs, and policies which addressed system needs could be based on actual experience and outcomes. IEQ/Malawi also hosted a variety of events to discuss the findings as they related to education quality issues and to encourage the use of research as a tool in discussions and decision-making related to education reform.

### ***Impact and sustainability of interventions over time / Areas of success as identified by evaluators and stakeholder to achieve quality education***

The four-year term of IEQ/Malawi drew to a close in June of 2003. The Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) and Save the Children Federation (SCF) formed a partnership to implement the educational research program of the IEQ/Malawi project. The partnership was unique in that both partners were local institutions. Their terms of reference included the conduct of research activities to influence government policy to improve quality of education. It included classroom-based research and interventions at the grassroots, community, and district levels, reinforced by MIE as a curriculum development center with the ability to use the research findings of the project to change national curriculum. IEQ/Malawi professional development opportunities, material, and technical support contributed to the success of the partnership. The strengthening of this partnership enhanced not only the more immediate outcomes of the project but also contributed to the sustainability of activities and to the longer-term impact of effects.

The strength of the capacity building that characterized the project will determine the sustainability of the methodology and ultimately of the improvement in quality of education. Already notable decisions and products, validated by the research studies, are evident in the educational system. The project was earmarked by copious publications, seminars and workshops, and findings proffered opportunities for pursuing quality at the curriculum, professional development, and policy levels. During one of the later formal meetings of the IEQ/Malawi team, key accomplishments of the work were noted, and these accomplishments described lasting contributions that would motivate future action: (i) creation of a comprehensive database; (ii) a continuous assessment manual positioned for integration into the primary school curriculum; (iii) a copyrighted resource guide for dissemination to donors and program developers; (iv) enhanced skills in research and development; and (v) an integration of findings from the research on an ongoing basis with teachers and policymakers who find application of the findings in their classrooms and with their colleagues.

IEQ/Malawi was characterized by three stages noted within a “cycle of improvement” – assessing the situation, analyzing the results, and acting on the findings. Baseline surveys produced data that, through analysis, revealed findings on teacher mobility, repetition, and drop-out. These findings, in turn, through dissemination and discussion motivated outcomes such as

recommendations for school staffing, the design of new teacher training courses, and information for donors to use for determining educational aid to the Malawi educational system.

### **Quality Education through Supporting Teachers (QUEST) (1998-2003)**

#### ***Objectives of the project and vision of quality within the project's design***

The QUEST project directly addressed issues of quality. QUEST intended to improve quality of basic education by increasing access to basic education, enhancing quality, increasing efficiency, and by testing the impact of integrated curriculum. The aim of the QUEST project was to increase children's access to quality basic education in a school setting that is conducive to effective learning. This goal or vision of quality indirectly acknowledges the realization that quality and quantity in education are two sides of the same coin, that is, quantity without quality is of limited benefit and cannot be sustained.

#### ***Interventions intended to improve educational quality***

Under increased access to basic education, the project intended to create 16,500 new places and establish 33 new community schools (with 33 trained school committees) with 132 classrooms and 33 wells for safe water. To enhance quality, the project supported creative teaching. Creative teaching included (i) using creative and diverse teaching methods in classrooms; (ii) developing teaching aids from local materials; (iii) making classrooms attractive for students; (iv) providing individual attention to students with particular attention to gender; (v) using continuous assessment of students to improve learning; (vi) using data in making promotion decisions; and (vii) collecting and using data such as absence rates and information on dropouts to identify problems related to class size and student persistence. To increase efficiency in the school system, QUEST aimed to empower the school committees to develop, manage, and implement school curricula and monitor pupil drop-out and repetition so as to achieve a reduction of 10 percent in drop-out rates. In addition, to influence education policy, the project intended to test integrated curriculum in one of the districts.

#### ***Indicators and intended outcomes of quality built into the project design***

The indicators and intended outcomes as set in the project design were

- Increased access for 16,500 pupils in 33 community schools;
- Enhanced pupil learning by 20 percent;
- Decreased pupil repetition by 10 percent; and
- Decreased pupil drop-out by 10 percent.

#### ***Measurement of indicators and outcomes***

In the first year of QUEST a partnership of Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) and the IEQ/Malawi program was established to design and conduct collaboratively a study on the impact of the QUEST project and of pupils' learning in particular. As part of this effort, extensive data were collected and analyzed to study the impact of QUEST. The data track

students' performance in mathematics, Chichewa reading, and English reading using a set of performance-based curriculum referenced instruments. Information on schools and communities is also included in the longitudinal study. By the time of the 2002 evaluation, the QUEST program had collected baseline data in target districts in February 1999; follow-up data were collected in October 1999 and 2000.

### ***Location and socio-economic contexts of implementation***

QUEST was implemented in three districts: Mangochi, Balaka, and Blantyre Rural. After the 1994 presidential declaration of free primary education, schools were filled with enthusiastic pupils who dreamed of obtaining education and doing well in life. The school system, however, was not ready to accommodate so many new pupils or to provide quality basic education. Most teachers were untrained and most schools lacked instructional materials. Although USAID had been implementing education activities in Malawi from 1991-1998 through the GABLE projects, the issue of improving quality of education had not been sufficiently addressed. QUEST was launched by USAID in 1997/1998 to address quality problems in the three districts at nearly the same time that IEQ/Malawi was launched to take a different but complementary approach to quality.

### ***Degree of integration of interventions with government programs***

QUEST's objective to enhance quality and increase school spaces for children was directly in line with Government of Malawi policies. The project was designed to build system-wide capacity for supporting sustained quality improvements through the establishment of school clusters, mentor teacher programs, and through facilitation of dialogues at the district, division, and central levels about systemic reforms and policy development that promote and sustain quality. A 2002 evaluation of the project showed that all government partners agreed with the strategies of the QUEST project and many were directly involved in its implementation.

### ***Impact and sustainability of interventions over time***

QUEST project ended in 2003. Some of the strands of the QUEST project have been incorporated in the subsequent project, USAID-funded Malawi Education Support Activity (MESA) that started in 2003. From the last evaluation of QUEST, it seems that the Ministry of Education fully favored the strategies of the project and wanted to expand it to other districts, which is promising for the prospects of sustainability.

With regard to the impact on student achievement, the 2002 evaluation of QUEST showed that some of the goals were achieved. Based on the monitoring data for 1999 and 2000 (other than standard 2 English passages, standards 2 and 3 English comprehension, and standard 4 mathematics), the performance indicator of a 20 percent gain was successfully achieved. However, the evaluators pointed out that results are based on asking pupils to read English passages from books that they had studied in the previous year. For example, pupils completing standard 3 read the same standard 2 passage that they had read during the collection of baseline data. In addition, pupils seemed to have memorized the passages rather than learned to read specific words. Girls performed less well than boys on these assessments. Students from QUEST

schools performed better in English, but their mathematics scores were similar to non-QUEST schools. Evaluators in 2002 pointed out that “though successful, the accomplishments made by QUEST are not considered to be sustainable at this time and it would be premature to discontinue the support to current districts until sustainable reform is achieved.”

***Areas of success as identified by evaluators and stakeholders to achieve quality education***

Following are some program areas of success according to the 2002 evaluation of QUEST that was conducted by the Mitchell Group, Inc. The evaluation studied both the QUEST and non-QUEST teachers. Evaluators noted that teachers who were trained under QUEST were observed to practice more diverse teaching methods. QUEST teachers used grouping strategies, role playing, pair work, and integration of songs into classroom instruction. Most of the QUEST teachers also showed expertise and interest in developing teaching aids from local materials. The grouping strategy employed by QUEST teachers provided more opportunity for individual attention. Compared to non-QUEST classes, pupil-teacher interaction was much more prevalent in QUEST teachers’ classrooms. In addition, QUEST teachers were more gender sensitive and did not favor boys over girls. During interviews 72 percent of the teachers agreed that training on materials’ preparation was the most useful for them whereas only 20 percent teachers pointed out that QUEST pedagogical techniques for stimulating pupil participation and grouping techniques were the most useful to them.

The establishment of school cluster networks and the mentor teacher program were considered to be the most successful areas of the QUEST project. Teachers, community members, and education officials at all levels agreed that before the start of the cluster teacher development and mentoring program, there had been a serious gap in Malawi’s teacher support system. The mentors are called the Primary Education Advisors (PEAs). According to the 2002 evaluation, the supervision support by PEAs varies from district to district. In areas where PEA visits are sporadic, it is due to the fact that the advisor lives outside the zone and is not able to visit the cluster on regular basis. To address this issue, all QUEST partners worked to construct houses for PEAs near the cluster so that they could visit the teachers on regular basis. The evaluators of QUEST pointed out that this problem solving and collaboration among various partners is commendable.

As a result of QUEST activities, pupil dropout has declined in all QUEST schools, and there is a dramatic increase in student retention in these schools. The reason for this is that teachers have learned ways to monitor student progress and make decisions about promotion through formal assessment at the end of the year. When teachers are aware and care about pupils’ performance they are less likely to promote them to a class where they are more likely to fail and eventually drop out.

Community members reported that they were aware of the program and were happy to assist their teachers in any way that they could. The 2002 evaluation suggested that more regular community facilitation and support may be necessary from the PEAs to establish sustained community involvement.

### ***Challenges as identified by evaluators and stakeholders to achieve quality education***

The 2002 evaluators pointed out that, in spite of the fact that QUEST teachers clearly demonstrated new skills in many areas that were included in the project, their application of new pedagogical methods was weak in areas of literacy and numeracy. Much of the teaching observed in the classroom failed to maximize pupils' opportunities to learn. Participatory approaches to learning do not, in and of themselves, maximize learning. Teachers are not able to encourage the characteristics of learning to generalize and apply simple concepts outside of their classrooms. In addition, it should not be assumed that teachers can develop adequate learning materials as a result of the training under QUEST. Some materials are required beyond what is produced locally especially for literacy enhancement. Also most schools had few, if any, desks or small tables and chairs at which students can work. Availability of such school materials is an essential part of the learning processes. Teachers in schools associated with QUEST also did not demonstrate sufficient knowledge of pupil assessment and various techniques of regularly assessing their children.

### **Malawi Education Support Activity (MESA) (2003-ongoing)**

USAID/Malawi has recently launched the Malawi Education Support Activity project (MESA) through EQUIP1. MESA continues USAID's commitment to enhancing educational quality in the country. The project design builds upon the experiences of GABLE, IEQ/Malawi, and the QUEST projects.

#### ***Objectives of the project***

The objective of MESA is to improve the effectiveness of schools leading to increased student achievement. It is expected that more effective schools will lead to higher pupil persistence, lower repetition rates, fewer dropouts, and increased learning.

#### ***Vision of quality within the project design***

MESA is contributing to the quality and efficiency of basic education in Malawi by

- Improving teachers' professional skills;
- Making schools more effective; and
- Mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS in the education sector.

#### ***Interventions intended to improve educational quality***

Some of the interventions that are part of MESA are (i) improving teachers' professional skills in content knowledge (civics education, HIV/AIDS awareness, life skills education), and instructional practices (continuous assessment, classroom management); (ii) improving school effectiveness through the infusion of new resources including improving physical infrastructure of teacher education at Domasi College and Mzuzu University and facilitating the production and distribution of textbooks and other classroom resources; (iii) focusing on community

participation in the classroom; and (iv) making school management committees and parent-teacher associations (PTAs) more effective.

It is through this process that MESA is addressing and mitigating critical social concerns, particularly HIV/AIDS, that have a negative effect on access, persistence, and quality of basic education. HIV/AIDS issues will also be addressed through Theater for Development (TFD) activities in areas where high-risk HIV/AIDS behaviors are most prevalent and areas where there were higher rates of sexually transmitted infections.

MESA is assisting in the incorporation of the new primary level (standards 1-8) social studies curriculum into all schools in Malawi and developing teachers' skills to use the curriculum effectively in the classroom. It is being carried out in three phases: (i) development of resource materials; (ii) development of national capacity in citizen education; and (iii) training of classroom teachers.

### ***Indicators and intended outcomes of quality built into the project design***

The key project outcomes include

- Teachers increasingly using (i) creative/participatory methods of teaching; (ii) continuous assessment; (iii) effective teaching methods to promote equitable learning for both boys and girls; and (iv) teaching/learning resources effectively.
- Teachers mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS through integration of life skills curriculum and teaching methods.
- Teachers incorporating civic education into the curriculum effectively.
- School management committees achieving "effective" status and implementing as well as supporting strategies for HIV/AIDS mitigation at their schools, zones, and/or at the district level.
- Pupils increasingly (i) retained in schools; (ii) promoted to higher classes; (iii) achieving mastery in reading skills in English and in numeracy; and (iv) passing standard 8 examinations.
- Constructing four classrooms and twelve lecturers' offices at Domasi College of Education.
- Establishing an Information Technology Center at Mzuzu University.

### ***Location and socio-economic contexts of implementation***

MESA is being implemented in the four districts of Mzimba South, Kasungu, Machinga and Phalombe. The introduction of free primary education in conjunction with the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education sector has resulted in a dire shortage of basic physical and human resources, especially of trained and capable teachers. These factors together have contributed to the overall rapid decline in learning attainment and the quality and efficiency of Malawi's primary education has deteriorated to a critically low point. Fewer than half the children who enter primary school make it to standard 6, and a recent analysis of reading attainment reveals that almost 80 percent of children in standard 6 cannot comprehend grade-level texts at even minimal levels. Although the percentage of national budget devoted to education increased dramatically from 17 percent to 27 percent between 1994 and 2002, expenditure per pupil at the



same time has dropped from approximately \$20 in 1994-95 to \$12 in 1999 because of the even more dramatic increase in pupil enrollment and lingering problems with heavy rates of repetition.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this retrospective pilot study is to provide information on thirteen years of USAID-funded projects in Malawi and to examine the relationships and dynamics between project design and project outcomes in a particular context regarding the improvement of education quality. The study was designed to provide a preliminary understanding of (i) the conceptualization of education quality that was explicit or implicit in project designs; (ii) the interventions carried out to enhance education quality; and (iii) the impact of interventions.

The study has limitations which arise from four factors: (i) The lack of field data and the absence of the voices of those who designed the projects, implemented them, and evaluated their impact (including the voices of policy makers and administrators, teachers, students, and community members in Malawi), limits our understanding of the impact of projects and prevents verification and triangulation of information from documents. (ii) It was difficult to obtain full documentation on all of the projects. This limited the researchers' view of project detail. (iii) The documents that were available to the researchers (e.g. evaluation reports, implementation plans, annual reports) vary widely in scope, depth, and quality. (iv) Financial information, for the most part, was not available, making it impossible to include information on allocation of resources in support of different kinds of quality interventions.

Despite these limitations, the researchers feel that the broad and general information that forms the basis of the study is sufficient to identify important overall trends and specific project purposes, implementation strategies, and results. We feel that we have been able to draw an informative picture of thirteen years of project implementation which will be of interest to policy makers, project designers, project implementers, and others in the education sector. The matrix in Annex 1 gives an overview of the scope and content of the four projects that we studied.

The project descriptions in this paper indicate a shift in USAID's emphasis from access and retention during the early years of GABLE to a more explicit focus on quality in GABLE II, IEQ/Malawi, QUEST and MESA. In the early 1990s during GABLE I implementation, USAID supported the government's policies to expand educational access and increase enrollments, albeit with reservations, with a more indirect attention to quality. USAID refocused its attention to emphasize issues of quality in GABLE II and subsequent projects when there were indications that quickly increasing enrollments were having a negative impact on quality. GABLE I and II were particularly effective in the use of NPA and in the Social Mobilization Campaign which carried out a variety of activities to sensitize local communities to the importance of educating girls.

IEQ/Malawi is representative of one of the best applications of donor assistance to a developing country. By involving key stakeholders at all levels of the educational hierarchy, local ownership of quality improvement initiatives evolved under IEQ/Malawi. The project acknowledged the expertise that existed in the country, empowered locals through building their capacity, and

stimulated a movement from emphasis on the philosophical and theoretical to the practical aspects of improving educational quality. Under IEQ/Malawi, action research, a methodology highly participatory in nature, was used to collect data to enable policy decisions to be made based on a concrete awareness of the deteriorating quality conditions that existed. Through IEQ/Malawi, USAID can justifiably take credit for enabling Malawians to become more adept at “mastering their own fate” as they sought to improve the quality of their educational system. In addition, during the implementation of the QUEST project, USAID encouraged the IEQ/Malawi project to form a partnership with Save the Children to examine the implementation of QUEST through four years of the primary school cycle. Thus, a long-term quality research agenda under IEQ/Malawi and QUEST professional development projects combined together for maximum impact.

However, the challenges in the education system of Malawi, as outlined in an earlier section of this paper, are so immense that even excellent projects such as GABLE, IEQ/Malawi and QUEST have had only a minor impact on quality.

It is clear from the evaluation of QUEST that the intent of the project was good. However, unsupported by a classroom environment conducive to learning, diverse and creative methods of teaching have limited impact. Training of teachers to use interactive methodologies in the midst of severe infrastructural deficiencies severely limits the possibility of effective implementation.

QUEST provided state-of-the-art professional development to teachers, including continuous assessment techniques, but did not provide essential learning inputs such as sufficient space, print materials, books, and pencils. Institutional factors and limited resources therefore hampered the attempts of teachers to use the new approaches that they had learned.

Did USAID learn a lesson from the QUEST experience? There is evidence that the answer to this question is yes. Under MESA, USAID is still focusing on teacher professional development. However, this project also includes the production and distribution of textbooks and other classroom resources combined with a focus on community participation in the classroom and strengthening of school management committees and parent-teacher associations. It does not, however, address the issue of school infrastructure that, according to many studies, is a major cause of low educational quality in the country.

The MESA project relates directly to the current USAID strategic objectives in Africa, which are to

- Expand access to basic schooling, especially for girls and rural children;
- Assure a fundamental standard of quality in the delivery of basic education;
- Increase national commitment to sustaining resource levels for basic education sufficient to meet access, equity and quality goals;
- Improve national capacity to efficiently manage those resources for the delivery of effective education;
- Promote public-private cooperation at all levels through participatory policy dialogue and increased community and NGO involvement; and
- Contain the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In conclusion, this review of USAID projects in education in Malawi indicates that improving the quality of education was always important but evolved as the central concern for USAID in response to the specific crisis in Malawi's education system of decreasing quality that accompanied rapidly increasing quantity, especially after 1994. Quality was conceptualized and integrated within a series of projects starting more indirectly in GABLE I and more explicitly in GABLE II. The Social Mobilization Campaign, action research, and teacher- focused activities (training and capacity building) were identified as important components of quality improvement during IEQ/Malawi and QUEST.

Teacher inservice programs provide an impetus for teachers to return to their classrooms and change the teaching/learning process for which they are responsible. However, in the absence of basic classroom amenities such as textbooks, materials, enough light and air, the level of teaching and learning remains poor.

Social mobilization campaigns and mentoring activities under QUEST were identified as interventions that had optimal impact on quality. Parental participation in school in terms of supporting the teacher and teaching mentors who provided regular guidance did seem to have a positive impact on the teaching habits of the teachers.

However, there is no indication that these interventions had a "strong" impact on quality of the education system in Malawi. The QUEST teachers were better off than the teachers who did not receive any training, but negative institutional factors overwhelmed the teachers who reportedly could not implement what they learned in professional development sessions. As in most USAID projects focused on rural areas and schools, it is difficult to extrapolate the findings to other settings, particularly to urban schools.

The study suggests that USAID might consider in future the advantage of the continuity of projects in certain areas. Balaka and Mangochi districts in Malawi were the only areas where there is some continuity of interventions in that IEQ/Malawi and QUEST were implemented in both of them. Although we have traced four projects over a span of thirteen years in Malawi, not any particular area of the country had the benefit of participating in all four over that period of time. Only with continuity can longer-term impact be assessed.

The new MESA project, which builds on the lessons learned from IEQ/Malawi and QUEST, is being implemented in Mzimba South, Kasungu, Machinga and Phalombe districts, all new areas. In this situation, USAID implementers have new challenges to adapt to, build quality from scratch, and deal with new faces and demands. Dropping Balaka and Mangochi from MESA is strategically questionable. Lessons from these two districts under MESA would have informed policy makers about the advantages of continuous quality interventions in an area and the resulting impact on student achievement and teacher satisfaction over an extended period of time.

There were numerous evaluations of GABLE, IEQ/Malawi, and QUEST. These evaluations vary in quality and reveal some useful information about local voices and points of view concerning the impact of the projects. The evaluation of QUEST by the Mitchell Group, for example, is one of the more comprehensive of the evaluations that the researchers of this paper came across. Whereas it praises the excellent interventions of QUEST, it remains firm in its criticism of the

project, questioning the possibility of any long-term impact on educational quality due to classroom and other institutional and contextual factors. The QUEST evaluators interviewed teachers, community members, and government officers.

The ability of USAID to view the evaluations in a positive way and continue to adapt based on the lessons learned is commendable. The newly launched Malawi Education Support Activity (MESA) project integrates the lessons from QUEST, GABLE, and IEQ with a focus on teacher development, textbooks for schools, parental participation, and a new focus on HIV/AIDS. As this project is in its early stages, it remains to be seen how effective it will be. Indeed, implementing MESA in Balaka and Mangochi would have shown in more concrete terms the benefits of quality improvement interventions over a substantial period of time.

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Improving Educational Quality  
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## ANNEX 1

### USAID Quality Interventions in Malawi – An Overview

Program	Geographic Areas	Implementing Agency	Interventions						
			Research	Girls' Education	Social Mobilization	Teacher Education	Curriculum Materials	Textbooks for children	School rehabilitation/ Construction
<b>GABLE</b>	Nationwide	Creative Associates, local agencies	X	X	X		gender unit to influence curriculum		X
<b>IEQ</b>	Mangochi and Balaka	AIR	X			X			
<b>QUEST</b>	Mangochi, Balaka and Blantyre	Save the Children	X		X	X	X		X
<b>MESA</b>	Mzimba South, Kasungu, Machinga and Phalombe	EQUIP1 (AIR Save the Children, local agencies)			X	X	X	X	X College of Teacher Education